

## **TEACHERS GUIDE**

### **An Introduction to Philosophy Course**

#### **RATIONALE**

The use of fictive narrative to portray philosophy is not new. Plato's dialogues (especially the early dialogues) are perennial favorites among college students because of the narrative situation. In the ancient world, the mixed mode (of poetry and prose) and the utilization of poetry to express philosophy were quite popular. Parmenides, Lucretius, and Boethius used a narrative mode to convey philosophy.

Later, the modern philosopher Voltaire chose *Candide* to represent some of his philosophical reflections. Alexander Pope did the same in his *Essay on Man* and *The Rape of the Lock*. Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* is also very instructive in its intent. In the twentieth century philosophers as diverse as Sartre, Camus, Rand, Murdoch, and Ricoeur all wrote novels that were meant to complement their philosophy.

Typically, narrative works are either explicitly didactic or indirectly so. *The Extinction of Desire* is of the latter category. Unlike the Greek and Roman philosophers, and more like the nineteenth-century philosopher, Kierkegaard, this novel seeks to express its philosophy through indirect discourse that hides itself behind the narrative action.

The novel aligns itself to the class of fiction that intends to instruct indirectly.

#### **KEY THEMES IN THE EXTINCTION OF DESIRE**

- The manner in which any person in the world undergoes self-examination in order to ascertain what values represent his or her life aspirations. This fits with the "unexamined life is not worth living" tag that many teach in an introduction to philosophy class
- The role of *desire* as the driving aspect of worldview. The place and function of desire as an element of reflected worldview is highlighted
- Materialism as an element in one's worldview and in the world at large.
- Trust in others (Michael's separation from Aisling)
- Ethics (what is our ethical evaluation of the actions of the major characters?)
- Freedom and determinism (the events that befall Michael and his reactions to them)
- Epistemology (how one comes to know truths of practical reason).
- Love and its power to shape our lives
- Feminist Ethics (the interplay between the affective, the rational, and self-interest)

#### **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

- To be made aware of the activity of rational self-examination as a traditional activity in philosophy
- To understand the problem of rational worldview examination both academically and experientially
- To be able to project such self-examination onto characters s/he can relate to

- To become aware of how traditional problems in philosophy such as freedom, epistemology, and ethics can be teased out of lived experience (as represented in the narrative)
- To be able to write about self-examination from an academic and experiential point of view (including personal self-analysis)

## **SAMPLE SEMESTER SYLLABUS**

### **Recommended Books**

Micheal Boylan, *The Extinction of Desire*  
 Plato: *Euthyphro*  
*Apology*  
*Crito*

### **Recommended books on Epistemology**

Richard Fumerton, *Epistemology*  
 Sven Bernecker, *Reading Epistemology*

### **Recommended books on Freedom**

Robert Kane, *Free Will*

### **Recommended books on Ethics**

David Cooper, *Ethics: The Classic Readings*  
 Julia Driver, *Ethics: The Fundamentals*

OR Instructor can make his/her own packet of readings from his/her bookstore.

## **Weeks One – Four - *The Examined Life***

### **Assigned Books:**

Michael Boylan: *The Extinction of Desire*  
 Plato: *Euthyphro*  
*Apology*  
*Crito*

and perhaps an essay (see below).

### **Weeks One and Two**

- Plato, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito* (go over core issues of self-examination and its consequences)

- Talk about how these dialogues dictate an introspective imperative

- Finish Plato—then segue to issues in *The Extinction of Desire* (ask students to begin a log book on common issues between authors)

### **Week Three**

- Introduce another short reading. Perhaps a selection from a contemporary thinker who discusses integrated life plans: Rawls, DuBois, Sartre, feminist thinker (e.g., de Beauvoir, Gilligan, Tong, Held, et al.)

- Integrate Plato with contemporary thinker along with *The Extinction of Desire*.

#### **Week Four**

- Discuss the novel in terms of the examined life. Encourage students to explore the novel on its own terms with reference to the themes set out by the previous authors.

- Hold a class discussion on the contrasts in ways that people come to recognize ways that we create the worldviews. What is the place of desire in this mix? How does the strategy of the protagonist, Michael, fit in with this discussion?

More can be done, but one-third of a course on a single topic is typical for Introduction to Philosophy.

**Other sub-sections can be formed around the above themes. If one were to structure a course around: Self-examination, epistemology, ethics and freedom, then one could form an entire course.**

End with a short paper.

#### **Weeks Five – Eight - *How we Know***

**Week Five:** Go through the various theories of truth

**Recommended Reading:** Frederick F. Schmitt, *Theories of Truth*

**Week Six and Seven:** Go through various epistemological ways of coming to know truth along with reasons for skepticism.

**Recommended Reading:** Charles Landesman and Roblin Meeks, *Philosophical Skepticism*

**Week Eight:** Challenge students to identify one theory of truth and a way of knowing and link this to one of the characters in the book. Evaluate the way the character performs next to the standard—short paper. [*The Extinction of Desire* by Michael Boylan]

#### **Weeks Nine – Twelve - *Ethics and Freedom***

**Week Nine:** Examine the Problem of Relativism.

**Recommended reading:** Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo, *Foundations of Ethics*

**Weeks Ten and Eleven:** Discuss the problems of determinism, extreme freedom, some stances in-between.

**Recommended reading:** Robert Kane, *Free Will*

**Week Twelve:** Challenge students to identify one key scene in the book as an instance of the problem of ethics and freedom. Does Love have a place here? Have them argue for one position using the book as sort of case study—short paper [*The Extinction of Desire*]

**Weeks Thirteen and Fourteen:** It's now time to make one of the small papers into the term paper. Have the students meet in sub-groups according to topic. Each student will make a presentation to his/her peers about his final paper and receive feedback. After these sessions have each student e-mail the instructor with her/his plan for the final paper. The instructor makes brief comments on each.